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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007920

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/31/2014

TAGS: [PREL](#) [FR](#) [MNUC](#) [IR](#) [PINR](#) [KNUP](#)

SUBJECT: FRENCH THINK TANKER ON VISIT TO IRAN

Classified By: PolMC Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4 (B & D).

1. (C) Summary: French think-tanker Francois Gere, who claims to have extensive ties to the local Iranian Embassy as well as the Quai and Israeli Embassy met with us November 18 to report on his recent trip to the Isfahan nuclear facility at the Iranian government's invitation. Gere -- who many would say is too close to the Iranians -- is a tireless proponent and would-be initiator of dialogue between Iran and the U.S. Gere described a less-than-sophisticated but sustained and enthusiastic effort by Iran to acquire a nuclear weapons capability within the next 10-15 years, which might or might not proceed to the actual production of nuclear weapons. Gere viewed Iranian President Ahmadi-Nejad's statement on Israel as a part of an internal power struggle. He cautioned against viewing reformist minded (at least in appearance) Iranians as "pro-American." We see Gere as an apologist for the Iranians, but report his observations for what they are worth. End Summary.

2. (C) In a November 18 meeting with Deputy Polcouns, Gere had just returned from a trip to Isfahan and said he was granted access to the site. He likened the workers -- with their long hair, jeans, and no beards, to young Americans between 25 and 30 years of age. He said the Iranian nuclear program presented a huge technological challenge, and compared it to France's own practice, when it embarked on developing its own nuclear weapons nearly fifty years ago, to hire young scientists. (The older ones, many of whom were Communist sympathizers, refused to work on the program.) Despite the young scientists' relative inexperience, Gere said the Iranian government was providing them with the resources they needed so that the program could forge ahead.

3. (C) Gere said it was nonetheless slow going: the Isfahan facility is not yet completely finished, and Iran has had difficulties, for example in acquiring the kind of high-quality specialized steel it wanted. Germany had refused, and the U.S. had intervened with China to the same effect. He speculated that Iran was now manufacturing the steel itself or perhaps acquiring it from countries like Pakistan. Even though Iran broke the IAEA seals to resume the production of gas from uranium cake, Gere said there were cameras everywhere to monitor the actual production, including in unnecessary places. Gere judged that the Iranians would not be in a position to produce nuclear weapons for another 10-15 years.

4. (C) Gere characterized President Ahmadi-Nejad's comments on Israel as intended primarily for internal consumption: a provocation reflecting internal power struggles and the desire of a younger generation to take over from the old. Gere maintained that, while it was clear Iran wanted to have the capability to produce nuclear weapons should it choose to do so, this did not necessarily mean that Iran intended to proceed to actual production. (Deputy Polcouns took the line that the history of Iranian deceptions provided no basis for such a willfully benign interpretation.) He pushed for dialogue as the only means of persuading the Iranians not to develop a nuclear weapons capability, including "informal" meetings initially between Iranian and U.S. think-tankers. The departing Iranian ambassador here had told him, he claimed, that such meetings were still possible despite the apparent hardening of the regime. Gere conceded the point that the emergence of a harder-line regime would seem to make dialogue even less likely and more difficult than before, but he insisted that such a dialogue nonetheless remained possible.

5. (C) Asked how young Iranians were reacting to the regime, Gere divided them into three groups: the masses people in the country who were often illiterate and easily manipulated by the regime; hard-liners in the cities who were the vanguard of the Republican Guard; and those who were fed up with clerical rule and longed for a more normal life (i.e., to wear blue jeans and make-up). On the latter group, in response to mention of newspaper articles suggesting that many Iranian youth were pro-American, Gere said it would be a mistake to equate a desire for a more universal youth lifestyle with pro-Americanism. He nonetheless found his reception by average Iranians, where he was hospitably treated and invited to tea despite being an obvious Westerner, far preferable to the harassment he said he would likely encounter in Yemen or Saudi Arabia under similar circumstances.

16. (C) Comment: Francois Gere, President of the Institut Francais d'Analyse Strategique (IFAS), is well known to Embassy and is one of many opinion leaders -- Thierry Montbriand of IFRI, Alexander Adler of "Le Figaro," Francois Heisbourg of the Foundation for Strategic Research -- in regular contact with the Iranians here. Gere has insisted that he consults regularly with the Israelis and Quai officials on Iran; indeed, Deputy Polcouns ran into him in the lobby of the MFA before scheduling this latest meeting. We see Gere as an apologist for the Iranians, but report his observations for what they are worth. One well-informed MFA contact informally cautioned that Gere is too close to the Iranians, does not have much credibility among GoF disarmament specialists, and implied that we should also be careful with Gere's information. That said, there is also some evidence that the GoF values his insights; Gere was recently awarded the Legion d'Honneur and now sports a natty red bar on his lapel. End comment.

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